

Shi'i Perceptions of *The Iraq Study Group Report*

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When addressing the reactions of various Iraqi groups to the findings and the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group (ISG), one has to bear in mind that Iraqis do not view the Iraq Study Group's main purpose to be pertinent to their plight. Rather, they view the formation of the ISG as a means to help a perplexed American administration to break the vicious cycle of failure in Iraq, which has encompassed every aspect of life in the country: politics, security, services, economics, reconstruction, and to the last item in the long list of necessities.^[1] It is no wonder, then, that Iraqis fell into two categories, those who rejected the Group's report and others who complimented it with cold and vague statements.

Being true to its mission, *The ISG Report* is a reminder of the British reports from the Iraqi Mandate era in the 1920's. The first item in the report was a "Letter from the Co-Chairs" that reads, in part, as follows:

"There is no magic formula to solve the problems of Iraq. However, there are actions that can be taken to improve the situation and protect American interests.

Many Americans are dissatisfied, not just with the situation in Iraq but with the state of our political debate regarding Iraq. Our political leaders must build a bipartisan approach to bring a responsible conclusion to what is now a lengthy and costly war. Our country deserves a debate."

Other than the diplomatic phrase of "honor[ing] the many Iraqis who have sacrificed on behalf of their country," in the last sentence, there is virtually no attention paid to the interests of Iraq or the desires and aspirations of the Iraqis, as there was no mention of the cost this war has caused for the Iraqis. In essence, the report could not have been written with a more alienating tone as far as the Iraqi audience is concerned.

This essay addresses the reactions to the Group's report among the Shi'a. But before any further elaboration, it should be helpful to map out the Shi'a factions and their aspirations regarding the salient recommendations in the report.

The Shi'i landscape

Political and religious factions have mushroomed in Iraq since the collapse of Saddam Hussein's government on April 9, 2003. In the past, two active political groups were generally known:

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The Da`wa Party : a religious party established in the late 1950s under the influence of Ayatullah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, an exceptional Islamic scholar who was executed by the Iraqi regime in the context of the political escalation between Iraq and Iran prior to the eight-year war (1980-1988). The Da`wa Party had a strong organization inside Iraq, but the leadership resided in Iran, Syria and London. Membership in this party was considered, by Iraqi law, a crime punishable by death.[2] The group leadership was split later into two major factions, one technocrat and another made of clergymen. The split was caused mainly by the disagreement between the two factions about the Iranian meddling in the party's affairs. Both factions of the party returned to Iraq after the U.S. invasion. Although they were against the invasion, Da`wa leaders have participated in the political process and played an important role in the past years—the last two Iraqi prime ministers were chosen from the Da`wa Party.

The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) : this group was established in Iran, by the late Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, son of Ayatullah Sayyid Muhsin al-Hakim. Sayyid Muhsin al-Hakim was the head cleric in the Najaf Seminary (the *Hawza*) until 1970. The Iraqi government brutally persecuted his family in the 1970s and 1980s; his sons, Muhammad Baqir and Abd al-Aziz, managed to escape to Iran. The former established the SCIRI in 1982, recruiting its membership mainly from Iraqi exiles in Iran and the repentant Iraqi prisoners of war who were captured over the years.[3] The latter group became known as the Badr Corps (*Faylaq Badr*) and remained under the command of Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim. They received both military and ideological training in Iran.

Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim became a household name in the Iraqi south in the 1980s and 1990s. This author recalls passing through the Marsh areas during the 1991 uprising in the midst of crowds chanting Muhammad Baqir's name. One man actually claimed that the Sayyid (i.e. Muhammad Baqir) was in town, leading the uprising, which was not true of course because he, like all other opposition leaders, failed to agree on a location to meet and decide how to help the uprising, much less to do something about it.

The SCIRI returned to Iraq after the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime and, later in the same year, Muhammad Baqir was assassinated as he was leaving the Friday Prayer, which he led in the Shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf. His brother Abd al-Aziz took his place, democratic considerations notwithstanding.

In addition to the Da`wa Party and the SCIRI, there was the clergy establishment in the holy cities of Iraq, especially in Najaf, where the oldest continuing Shi`a seminary (the *Hawza*) is located.[4] Since 1970, the *Hawza* has been under the guardianship of the Grand Ayatullah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei and his student and successor, Grand Ayatullah Ali al-Sistani, both of whom never acquired an Iraqi citizenship. As such, the *Hawza* leadership pursued a non-political approach, often causing the anger of some firebrand Ayatullahs, such as Khomeini in the 1970s and Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr in the 1990s. Ayatullah Khomeini, while mainly concerned with Iranian politics, had tacitly accused the *Hawza* leaders of infidelity to the authentic teachings of Islam, because of their advocacy of separation of religion and politics.[5]

Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr was also an outsider (i.e. not part of the *Hawza*). He criticized the quietist approach and, contrary to it, he established his own school, branding it "the Vocal *Hawza*" (*al-Hawza al-Natiqah*), to imply that the *Hawza* of Sistani was "the Silent *Hawza*." The main product of the Vocal *Hawza* was presented in the form of Friday sermons in the Grand Mosque of Kufa, where Imam Ali gave his sermons 1,350 years ago. Sadr gave ninety speeches (two each Friday) before he was assassinated in late February 1999, evidently by the regime of Saddam Hussein.[6]

Following the 2003 regime change, the first actor on the Shi`a scene was the Sadr Movement, a network consisting of the loyal followers of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, who gave allegiance to his only surviving son, Muqtada al-Sadr. Having been active under the radar of all observers, this

group was underestimated by the U.S. officials, to the detriment of their mission in Iraq. In addition to their founder's disillusion with the quietism of the *Hawza*, the group resented being dismissed by the Americans, who favored their counterparts from the Da'wa and the SCIRI. They were also feeling the pressure from some well-funded groups that returned from, or newly established by, Iran, especially in the southern cities of Basra, Imara and Nasiriyah. Some of these new entities were established under the guidance of returning clergymen who used to be part of the Da'wa Party of SCIRI. Paradoxically, most of these new parties claim some intellectual descent from the "Two Sadrs" (Muhammad Baqir and Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr).

One of the most successful factions that was established after 2003 is al-Fadhila Party (the Virtue Party), founded by Shaykh Muhammad al-Yaqoobi. It is a major component of the Shi'a coalition in the Iraqi Parliament and is a growing party with more than one web site. They also have a newspaper and several offices in and outside Iraq. The party assumed several ministries, including the Oil Ministry in several administrations since 2004.^[7] The founder's web site has a place for answering the questions of "concerned believers," who ask about a variety of issues, from the opinion about drinking the "Islamic Beer" to the permissibility of certain clothes for men and women. Most shocking of these answers was his opinion that a man who wears short pants is not human, but an animal who needs to be advised gently, and if such advice is not effective, then by "gradual coercion."^[8] Al-Fadhila made news in the past days by its withdrawal from the United Iraqi Alliance, the largest bloc in the Assembly, citing the need to end "sectarianism" in Iraqi politics.

Not unpredictably, this diversity among the Shi'a has created some serious tensions and, with so much at stake, violent clashes that plagued most of the communities in the southern Iraqi region, where the regime's former victims are still collecting the remains of their loved ones from the scattered mass graves across the region. The fighting has many causes, most prominent of those have been the control of the revenue from the holy shrines, the oil smuggling business and, of course, the fighting over the control of city councils, where billions of dollars are squandered with no accountability whatsoever.

The salient issues

Unlike the voices who lamented the selection of the members of the group because of the lack of expertise on the part of most members, this writer, acknowledging this fact, does not tend to blame the ISG members. If anything, they should be commended for their service. The blame goes for those who made the selection. It does not help that the ISG did seek the advice of many experts in the field—although some of the names listed are clueless about the Middle East and were listed merely because of their political weight. As Machiavelli suggested in *The Prince*, "a prince who is not prudent himself, cannot be well-advised." Hence, the Group, lacking knowledge about the basics, could not tell the difference between a good advice provided by Phebe Marr from a bad one that might come from someone less qualified on the advisory list.

The Shi'a and Kurdish grievances were best articulated by Mahmoud Othman, a leading Kurdish politician known for his forthright comments, who blasted the ISG for not having Iraqi members or doing enough homework inside Iraq, arguing that, "those who wrote it (i.e. the Report) have little knowledge about the situation in Iraq. They only visited the Green Zone for some days, they did not go to the south or to Kurdistan to ask the people there. This is the reason why their outcome and recommendations are superficial and inaccurate."^[9]

The greatest problem plaguing *The ISG Report*, however, pertains to the uneven treatment of Iraq's neighbors. The group's approach to these countries is disturbingly identical to the current approach taken by the Bush administration, with the single exception of demanding to engage Syria and Iran, a proposal that was rejected by the administration until very recently.^[10] Syria and Iran are described as part of the problem, while Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt are part of

the solution.^[11] While one cannot dispute the negative role played by Syria and Iran in Iraq, *The ISG Report* loses its credibility by giving a pass to the others, whose role is not less counterproductive. This hypocrisy is rampant throughout the U.S. political establishment that portrays these countries as “the moderate Arab governments,” in complete defiance of the truth and common sense. *The ISG Report*, by adopting this Orwellian style, has enforced the cynical beliefs that Mr. Baker’s strong ties to the Saudis made him a bad choice for this task.

Syria and Iran are blamed in *The ISG Report* for supporting militias and insurgents, Saudi and Jordan are considered as potential sponsors of reconciliation in Iraq. It is obvious to anyone with a pair of eyes that Saudi Arabia and Jordan play a similar, if not worse, role when it comes to support the forces of destabilization in Iraq. While it is fashionable to demonize Syria and Iran, even if for good reasons, it seems that Mr. Baker finds it very hard to criticize the Saudis, with whom he has special relations—Baker’s law firm, Baker Botts, represented the Saudis.

This “sweet” treatment of the Saudis and Jordanians in *The ISG Report* make the Shi’a very nervous. Saudi Arabia is the most anti-Shi’a country in the region. *The ISG Report*’s statement that “the Saudis could use their Islamic credentials to help reconcile differences between Iraqi factions” is preposterous. First, because the Saudis do not believe in the reconciliation between the Islamic factions and, more importantly, they have no Islamic credentials to speak of, since their Islamic standing as Wahhabis is disputed by the Sunnis and the Shi’a alike. Theirs is a cult that gave the world many extremist groups such as the Taliban and al-Qa`ida, not to mention their repugnant oppression of their own citizens. In the words of a leading scholar of Islamic studies:

“Sometimes the Wahhabis are characterized, particularly by non-Muslim observers searching for a brief description, as ‘extreme’ or as ‘conservative Sunnis, with adjectives such as ‘stern’ or austere’ added for good measure. It has, however, been observed by knowledgeable Sunnis since the earliest times that the Wahhabis do not count as part of the Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama’a [i.e. the Sunnis], for almost all the practices, traditions and beliefs denounced by Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahhab have been historically integral to Sunni Islam, enshrined in a vast body of literature and accepted by the great majority of Muslims.”^[12]

Jordan has also displayed its anti-Shi’a sentiments at the highest levels. King Abdullah II of Jordan made a statement warning of the rise of a “Shia Crescent” from Iran to Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, threatening the entire region, as he perceived it. Jordan also hosts many former Ba’athists and other Iraqi personalities who express hate to the Shi’a and support the so-called Iraqi resistance. The third member of the axis of “moderation,” President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, was more blunt in expressing his views. He told the pan-Arab TV, *Al-Arabiyya* that the Shi’a “are mostly always loyal to Iran and not to the countries where they live.”^[13]

The Shi’a consider the recommendations on the engagement of Iraq’s neighbors a way to counterbalance Iran’s help for the Shi’a. *The ISG Report* rightfully states:

“None of Iraq’s neighbors especially major countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel see it in their interest for the situation in Iraq to lead to aggrandized regional influence by Iran. Indeed, they may take active steps to limit Iran’s influence, steps that could lead to an intraregional conflict.”^[14]

Historically, Arab countries—all hold a Sunni identity—have intervened in an anti-Shi’a manner. The Shi’a view any call for a bigger role for those countries as a call to stop the progress of their political rights. Given the Bush administration’s attitude toward Iran, the Shi’a realize that the involvement of Iraq’s neighbors will not benefit them, as Iran’s input will be ignored, if it is ever requested. Hence, the process would be dominated by the anti-Shi’a countries.

The 28th recommendation in *The ISG Report* deems any provincial control over the whole or even part of its oil as incompatible with the national reconciliation. Sharing the oil according to population, as *The ISG Report* suggested, is a fair recommendation. However, the Shi'a, whose territories hold most of Iraq's known oil reserves, want the past neglect of their towns to be taken into consideration when oil revenues are distributed or used for the purposes of reconstruction and development. They want spending to keep in mind the need of each city, which means more spending, initially at least, in the Shi'i region. This writer, having served as a soldier in Basra, remembers the constant illness from bad water in the city, where drinking a decent cup of tea was, and still is, a luxury. The ISG should also know that sweeping this past under the rug of national reconciliation is also incompatible with national reconciliation.

Talking directly to Sistani and Sadr is a positive recommendation. However, it is not a foregone conclusion that Sistani would receive a U.S. emissary, even if he be "a high-level American Shia Muslim," as *The ISG Report* thoughtfully suggests.^[15] The same may be said about Muqtada al-Sadr. Although he is easier to contact, the United States does not seem ready to ingest some of his demands.

The ISG Report's recommendation to give an amnesty to "once-bitter enemies" has played a negative role in many Shi'a circles. This is seen by the Shi'a as a euphemism for re-Ba'athification in the government and the military. The ISG's lack of knowledge regarding Iraq's history may have made it easy to miss this sensitivity. The Ba'ath Party came to power in a vicious coup in 1963 and lost power soon thereafter, but a complete de-Ba'athification was not undertaken by the Arif government. Consequently, the Ba'ath came to power again in 1968 and established a reign of terror for thirty-five years. Repeating the same mistake will risk another episode of a Ba'athist tyranny in Iraq sooner or later. Also, amnesty would necessarily mean that the past regime's victims, the majority of whom are Shi'a, would receive no justice. In Islam, the state has no right to make concessions on behalf of the victim, or his kin, without their approval. Again, the ISG has no way of knowing this obscure, yet very important, detail. Any such amnesty, therefore, must secure the popular consent and be accompanied with an elaborate system of reparations. Otherwise, and given the long trail of the Ba'ath's criminality, this amnesty will open the door for the victimized to take the law into their hands.

Furthermore, *The ISG Report's* recommendation to transfer the entire Iraqi police force to the Ministry of Defense is a formula for creating several problems.^[16] For this move will essentially abolish the Ministry of Interior, as a national force. According to the sectarian distribution of cabinet positions, the Ministry of Interior has been a Shi'a ministry. In return, the Sunnis have the Ministry of Defense. Taking the best and strongest elements of the Ministry of Interior and allocating them to the Ministry of Defense will be seen by the Shi'a as an empowerment of their Sunni rivals and a weakening of their position, which would be absolutely unacceptable. Further, giving the Ministry of Interior the authority over local police in the provinces, while a good idea in the present time, does not sit well with the local governments who see their control over their local security as a sign of the self-governance in the post-Saddam era. The Shi'a, whose performance is arguably more successful in providing better security in their region, do not want to delegate this task to the central government whose performance has been catastrophic in every aspect.

The Shi'a Reactions

The Shi'a reaction to *The ISG Report* was not as negative as the Kurdish reaction. Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, has said that the report "is not fair, is not just, and it contains some very dangerous articles which undermine the sovereignty of Iraq and the constitution...[It is] a type of insult to the Iraqi people."^[17] Of course, the Kurdish fierce opposition to *The ISG Report* is understandable, since they stand to lose much more than anyone else should all the report's recommendations are implemented.

The ISG Report emphasized more than once the relation between Iran and Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, whose party, SCIRI was described as having “close relations with Iran”^[18] The militant wing of SCIRI, the Badr Brigade, according to the report, “has long-standing ties with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.”^[19] *The ISG Report* fails to mention that SCIRI and its leader, Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, are the only Shi’a religious group that supported the U.S. invasion of Iraq and they are the closest Shi’a allies of the United States in Iraq at the present time. This portrayal of the group in the report led al-Hakim to condition his acceptance of *The ISG Report’s* recommendations by expressing some reservations. He told some media outlets that he disagrees with the ISG on some parts of *The ISG Report*, which he described as “containing some inaccurate information.”^[20] A key member of the SCIRI, Jalal al-Din al-Sagheer, also cited problems with *The ISG Report’s* recommendations that suggest a very little role for Iraqis in the process. He took the opportunity to demand that Iraqis have a larger involvement in the decision making.^[21]

The former prime minister of Iraq, Ibrahim al-Ja’fari, criticized *The ISG Report’s* attempt to link the Iraqi case with other crises in the region, arguing, correctly, that this will complicate the Iraqi crisis even further.^[22]

Conclusion

There are several obstacles for the implementation of most of *The ISG Report’s* recommendations. First and most importantly, the U.S. administration has not made the decision to deliver Iraq to the Iraqis. The United States simply cannot deliver Iraq to the Shi’a majority or to the Sunni minority, because it perceives the former scenario as equivalent to delivering Iraq to Iran, whereas leaving the Sunnis in charge would necessarily mean delivering Iraq to al-Qa’ida, not to mention the collapse of any rhetoric regarding democracy and political idealism.

Second, *The ISG Report’s* recommendations go against the political nature of the administration’s key decision makers who view any concessions or pragmatic positions as a sign of weakness or defeat. As expected, the administration picked a few of the favorite recommendations for implementation and acted to the contrary of the most important ones. The administration and its allies in Congress even claimed that sending more troops to Iraq is indeed consistent with *The ISG Report*.

Third, various Iraqi factions find in *The ISG Report* a threat to their own interests. *The ISG Report* requires the Kurds to lower the ceiling of their demands and give up some of what they consider as their rightful share, whether it is the de facto independence they enjoy now or the ultimate fate of Kirkuk and other territories they claim to be part of Kurdistan.

The Sunnis, while applauding *The ISG Report’s* accurate statements on the militias and the sectarian conflict, found it lacking any real solution to the problem. More importantly for them, the report failed to ask for a specific schedule for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq. Other Sunnis lamented what they considered as the bad timing of *The ISG Report*, which they considered to be too late.^[23]

The Shi’a, especially SCIRI, find *The ISG Report* equally threatening to their dream in a large province made of nine governorates in the south where they will finally have a breathing room away from the meddling of the central government. SCIRI is of course the best situated at the present time to control such a province once it is formed. With the oil and other revenues, especially those coming from religious tourism, the new province will be one of the most prosperous places in the world. Further, *The ISG Report’s* recommendations on disarming the militias make the Shi’a uncomfortable, since the militias are, in spite of their present menace, the only guard against the vicious onslaught on the Shi’a by al-Qa’ida and the Ba’athists. Given the incompetence of the central government and the lack of effectiveness by the Multi-National

Forces in providing security, any talk about disarming the militias will not be welcomed by the Shi'a.

Finally, the politicians at all levels do not like the implementation of *The ISG Report's* recommendations regarding the end of financial and administrative corruption, which turned Iraq into one of the worst cases in the world. If there is one multi-partisan interest in today's Iraq, it would be the quest to maintain the current lack of accountability.

About the Author

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2. For a detailed history of the Da'wa Party, see Faleh Jabar's *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq* (Saqi Books 2003), 78ff.
3. *Ibid.*, 235ff.
4. The *Hawza* of Najaf has been continuously operational since 1055 AD.
5. While residing in Najaf, Ayatullah Khomeini wrote his famous book, *Islam and Revolution*, wherein he articulates the doctrine of *wilayat al-Faqih* (the sovereignty of the jurist). He accused the advocates of separating politics from religion of being agents of Western colonization.
6. An audio recording of the sermons can be found on the Sadr website: www.manhajalsadren.com/kutabaljum3a/index.htm
7. Al-Fadhila Party's website: www.alfadhela.org.
8. For details on this and other fatwas, see: www.yaqoobi.com.
9. Kevin Zeese and Liz Persson, "[Reactions to the long-awaited Iraq Study Group Report](#)," *AlJazeera Magazine* (Dec. 9, 2006): 5.
10. This policy was reversed when the administration agreed to talk to Syria and Iran during the Baghdad Conference on March 9, 2007.
11. [The ISG Report](#), 25-26 and 35.
12. Hamid Algar, *Wahhabism: A Critical Essay*, New York: IPI Press (2002), 2-3.

13. Abbas Kadhim, "[United We Stand: The demonisation of the Shia is on the rise](#)," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, April 13-19, 2006.
14. [The ISG Report](#), 35. While *The ISG Report* does not advocate the involvement of Israel in the Iraqi crisis, for obvious reasons, Israeli interests will certainly be represented through the U.S. presence in any effort. Hence, it is fitting that the report lists Israel in this statement.
15. [Ibid.](#), 46-47.
16. [Ibid.](#), 53-54.
17. Brian Knowlton, "[Baker and Hamilton Defend Report on Iraq](#)," *New York Times*, December 10, 2006.
18. See page 17 of [The ISG Report](#).
19. [The ISG Report](#), 11.
20. "Baker-Hamilton Report draws different reactions," editorial in *Al-Mada Newspaper*.
21. "[Half-hearted reactions to the Baker-Hamilton Report](#)," *German Press Agency (DPA)*, December 7, 2006.
22. Al-Ja`fari made this statement in [an interview](#) with the Iranian News Agency (IRNA) on December 7, 2006.
23. Editorial: "[Opinions are still differing on the Baker-Hamilton Report](#)," *Al-Sabah Newspaper*, December 10, 2006.